DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 310 UD 034 132

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TITLE Image Making of Arab Americans: Implications for Teachers in Diverse Settings.
PUB DATE 2001-01-00
NOTE 24p.; Portions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Association for Bilingual Education (Los Angeles, CA, January 31-February, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Arabs; Consciousness Raising; *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; *Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethnic Stereotypes; Higher Education; Immigrants; Mass Media Effects; Muslims; North Americans; Racial Bias

ABSTRACT

Arab Americans are a very diverse group. Misinformation about Arab culture plays a significant role in American perceptions and understandings of Arab American students. Whenever major events occur in the Middle East, Arab Americans become the focus of investigation. However, the Arab American community has remained relatively silent. The media plays a large part in perpetuating stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists. This is exemplified by the original assumption that the Oklahoma bombing was the act of Arab terrorists. This massive media campaign has detrimental consequences on Arab American students, who report being harassed and attacked by peers. Considerable stereotyping and racializing occurs in contemporary films and literature, where villains often are Arabs or Muslims. People are often erroneously led to assume that these two groups are synonymous. The media also uses the term fundamentalist interchangeably with terrorist. Erroneously perceived as a unified single ethnic group, the diversity of Arab Americans is very much overlooked. Teachers must engage in rectifying stereotypes about Arab Americans. Schools can take action against prejudice, discrimination, and racism, providing professional training for staff and accurate textbooks for students. (Contains 24 references.) (SM)

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ED 452 310

IMAGE MAKING OF ARAB AMERICANS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN DIVERSE SETTINGS

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Portions of this paper were presented at the California Association for Bilingual Education Conference, January 31-February, Los Angeles, CA
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UD034132

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Image Making of Arab Americans: Implications for Teachers in Diverse Settings

by

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Sociocultural Context:

One of the main barriers to understanding social and cultural traits of Arab American involves false definitions and stereotypes about who an Arab American is. Thus, it's important to point out the historical, social, geographical and traits unique to the Arab cultures. Arab Americans are citizens or residents of the United States who are historically immigrants or descendants of immigrants who came to the U.S. primarily from the countries that comprise the Middle East under certain political and social conditions. Although they come from two dozen countries, in southwest Asia and northern Africa, Arab Americans represent a wide range of diverse cultures, languages, religions, ethnic and racial backgrounds. Thus, an Arab can be Muslim, Christian, Jew, or of some other belief. Although the majority of Arab Americans are generally categorized as Caucasian, ethnic and racial diversity are two of the salient

features of this unique group. For example, Arab Americans can black, interracial, or white.

At the same time, not everyone coming from the Arab countries is an Arab. There are sizable portions of ethnic and racial communities that live throughout the Arab world. For example, such ethnic and racial groups as the Kildanis, Kurds, Druze, Barbers, and others have always been part of the Arab pluralism.

As a result, Arab Americans are very diverse in terms of their country of origin, their religion, and the reasons for immigration. For instance, of the approximately three million Arab Americans, most are Christians from Lebanese or Syrian descent (Al-Khatab, 1998; Bennett, 1999; Grant, 1995; Hooglund, 1987). However, Arab Muslims are increasing in number among the recent immigrants. They share a common language, Arabic, and many other cultural traits.

Many Arab Americans trace their family ancestry to the 1890-1940 wave of immigrants from Lebanon and Syria. Most of these early immigrants were Christians who have assimilated into the American way of life (Bennett, 1999; Grant, 1995; Hooglund, 1987). A second wave of Arab immigrants followed World War II in which many were Muslims from various Arab states. Other Arab Americans are descendants of Palestinians who fled after the 1967,

Arab-Israeli War. Although others do not trace their ancestry to any of these well-known waves of immigration (Banks, 1997), the search for better educational and economic opportunities have resulted in other subtle waves of immigration to America.

Arab Americans live throughout the United States, but most reside in the more visibly is such regions as the Northeast. They are considered one of the fastest growing groups of immigrants, settling mainly in big cities (Al-Ani, 1999). Michigan has one of the largest single Arab American community of over 250,000 only in the Detroit-Dearborn area. Also, New York and California have the largest and most visible Arab American populations in the U.S. (Banks, 1997).

Although many early Arab immigrants were peddlers and merchants, the new immigrants reflect a greater variety of professions. Whereas household income averages for Arab Americans tend to be higher than the national average; there is a greater percentage of Arab American households below the poverty level than for the U.S. population as a whole. This is because a large number of Arab immigrants are earning less than poverty income and have a higher unemployment rate (Banks, 1997).

Recent Treatment by American Society

Misinformation and lack of information about the Arab culture play a significant role in the American perception and understanding of Arab-American students (Al-Khatab, 1998; Suleiman, 1993). For years, Americans have largely ignored Arabs while Arabs have not ignored Americans. However, when Arab states cut oil production in the 70's and raised oil prices, Arabs received more attention (Banks, 1997). The Gulf War made Arabs more visible but in a negative way (Al-Khatab, 1998). According to Al-Ani (1999, p.143), "whenever major events take place in the Middle East, such as the Gulf War, the Arab American community often becomes the focus of investigation and interrogation." Nicholas Von Huffman (as cited in , 1998) has stated, "Arabs are the last ethnic group safe to hate in America"(p.5). This unpleasant status has reinforced Arab American silence (Orfalea, 1998). The 1990's have brought little change in the way Arabs are perceived or depicted. Paul Findley (as cited in Bennett, 1999) discusses the weak and almost nonexistent political stand of Arab Americans when he states, "Even if a congressman had wanted to hear the Arab viewpoint, he would have difficulty finding an Arab spokesman to explain it" (p.142). Accordingly, the American treatment of Arabs reflects Chomsky's (1999) argument about the underlying premise

of the paradoxes in the American democracy and the notion of putting profit over people.

Racialization: A Case in Point

Given the cultural conditioning, Arab Americans have frequently become an easy prey of ignorance. On April 19, 1995, the Alfred Murrow building in Oklahoma City was bombed, killing 168 people and injuring hundreds more. What makes this tragedy even more disturbing was the erroneous link to Middle Easterners during the first two days after the bombing, even though there was no evidence to support such accusations. The media, especially the mainstream newspapers and television news stations, played a huge part in zoning in exclusively on Arab terrorists and perpetuating the stereotypes about Arabs as terrorists. By pointing unrelentingly and with bias at Arabs as the perpetrators of the terrorist act, the media catalyzed and reinforced stereotypes against Arab Americans. This massive campaign has had its detrimental consequences on Arab American students attending public schools. Many were reported to have been harassed and physically attacked by their peers.

This automatic reaction to blame Arabs and Muslims is a result of many years of stereotyping and racialization in many forms of literature and visual media. For instance, many of the villains in contemporary films are usually foreigners and most often Arab or

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Muslim. In a recent Hollywood movie, The Siege, the villains are Arabs who quote the Koran and perform ablution before heading off to blow up innocent civilians. The movie depicts Muslims at prayer juxtaposed with acts of violence. Goodstein (1998) maintains that The Siege follows a succession of more than a dozen films, and made-for-television movies produced in the 1980's and 1990's featuring murderous Muslim fanatics, among them "Executive Decision," "True Lies," "Voyage of Terror," and "Terrorist on Trial." Terrorist has become synonymous with Arab or Muslim especially in the realm of visual media including news broadcasts. One of the first programs reporting the bombing was initially entitled "Terror in the Heartland." When it was later learned that the criminals were white male Americans, the title was changed to "Tragedy in Oklahoma". In contrast, a religious fanatic who shoots an abortion clinic is referred to as a gunman not a terrorist; but an Arab or Muslim who commits a crime is always a terrorist.

It has been assumed that language speaks us as much as we speak it. In the Oklahoma scenario, the language used to describe the assumed perpetrators was replete with negative connotations in reference to Arabs and Muslims. Language seems to have disclosed a lot of racial stereotypes in the mainstream mind as Arabs and Muslims were negatively portrayed.

After the initial shock of the blast subsided, anger became the driving force in pursuing justice. Americans could not imagine anyone besides foreigners who could commit such an act. This was the heartland of America. The predominately white Christian community could not identify the terrorist as one of their own. It seemed much easier to identify foreigners as terrorists and eventually scapegoats. This seemed to be the product of the countless news reports, movies, television shows, and other media tools that enhanced such negative images.

Many people assumed that this bombing was committed by Arabs and Muslims. Frequently people erroneously conceive these two terms as synonymous. In order to dispel the stereotype, one must differentiate between two terms: Arab and Muslim. An Arab is a person whose native language is Arabic and who lives by Arab cultural traditions and values. He or she is not tied to any particular religion. Religious diversity is characteristic of both the Arab world and the Arab American population. In the United States, where the majority of Arab Americans are Christians, there are still several thousands who belong to the Jewish faith.

On the other hand, a Muslim is an adherent of the religion Islam and may or may not be an Arab. It must be pointed out that Arabs are a minority in the Muslim community. Many Muslims are

from many different parts of the world such as China, Indonesia, Turkey, Russia, and even the United States. To label all Arabs as Muslims is a sweeping false generalization.

As the media intensely reacted to this tragedy in Oklahoma, special "experts" on terrorism were interviewed on all TV stations, newspapers, and radio shows. Many of these so-called experts linked this terrorist act to Arabs and Muslims. After the bombing of the World Trade Center and subsequent trials of some Islamic extremists, the climate was conducive to portraying Arabs and Muslims negatively. Consequently, hours after the bomb went off in Oklahoma, CBS Evening News featured Steven Emerson, a "terrorism expert," who eagerly presented his biases as objective analysis: "This was done with the intent to inflict as many casualties as possible. That is a Middle Eastern trait" (Cohen and Solomon, 1995, p.5). Any act of terrorism is intended to inflict casualties, but to claim this is a trait of Middle Easterners is blatant racialization and negative image-making.

After the bombing, many of these mainstream news agencies featured many of the so-called experts, many of whom were not even Arab or Muslim. By giving them access to present their biases for the public, they were able to reinforce prior prejudices that the public already exhibited, the fear of foreigners, people of color,

people who spoke a foreign language. On the CNBC cable-TV network, Cal Thomas' show featured an expert warning of illegal immigrants "coming in to destroy our democracy" (Cohen and Solomon, 1995, p.5). Unfortunately, many of the experts reinforced common stereotypes. These media consultants propagandized the threat of outside forces on the democratic stability of the United States.

As a result of careless accusations and innuendo, many innocent people including students in the public schools suffered from physical and emotional harassment. CAIR's (The Council on American-Islamic Relations) report on anti-Muslim hate crimes resulting from the unfounded links between Muslims and the April 19th bombing detailed more than 200 incidents of stereotyping, harassment, assault, property damage, and at least one death. The death of a near term baby resulted from an attack on a Muslim home in Oklahoma. A Jordanian American who left that day to visit family in Amman was returned from the London Airport to the United States for questioning. Abdul-Rafi (1996), as in (Ibrahim, 1995), feels that these incidents led to an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in the Arab and Muslim communities.

In many of the initial news reports, reporters claimed that two "Middle Eastern-looking" men were seen leaving the area!

Erroneously perceived as a unified single ethnic group, Arab Americans' diversity is grossly overlooked. Arabs in the United States come from different countries with different allegiances and interests. In addition, variations in skin, hair, and eye color are wide ranging. There is no "typical-looking" Arab man or woman. Stories of dark skinned bearded men leaving the scene where rampant in the first few hours after the bombing, a stereotype of a Muslim. Dark skin is not a characteristic of all Arabs and certainly not of Muslims. But the beard is also a common stereotype of Arab and certainly Muslim terrorists. Thus, men with beards are often associated with being fundamentalists. To the contrary, not all Arabs and not all Muslim men wear beards. Those who do, like men from any other cultural or religious background, grow their beards for different reasons. Some wear beards to cover bad skin complexion or because they have sensitive skin or even because they do not like to shave. Some devout Muslims do grow their beards for religious reasons in the way their Jewish and Christian counterparts do. Consequently, they are labeled fundamentalists, another key word for the media.

The media unfairly used the term fundamentalist interchangeably with terrorist. When one confronts someone with a beard or *galabiya*, a traditional dress of some Arabs, they are

immediately, and without question, labeled as fundamentalist and consequently as a threat. A fundamentalist is someone who follows the fundamentals of a religion, and who has nothing to do with terrorism. For a period of time, many Arabs and Muslims feared going outside in public places. The public atmosphere was very anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. There was a wave of anti-Arab rhetoric on TV and radio shows. People advocated mass deportation and restricting civil rights of those believed to be supporters of Islamic fundamentalists (Athar, 1995).

Wearing a beard by Muslim men, and a *hijab* (scarf worn to cover the hair on a woman's head) by women can cast false judgments and enhance stereotypes. After the bombing, many Muslim women were harassed in shopping malls, workplaces, schools, and other public places. As with beards, wearing *hijab* is a personal choice. To label a woman who chooses to wear *hijab* as a religious fundamentalist would be wrong. Many women wear *hijab* because of cultural traditions (Shabbas and Al-Qazzaz, 1989; Shakir, 1997). A devout Muslim woman does not necessarily wear *hijab*. And even if she did, that does not mean she is a supporter of any terrorist acts.

Most people seem to be familiar with stereotypes and negative imagery of Arabs and Muslims, indeed some are so firmly

entrenched that the consumers of these images are unable to distinguish them from reality. The day after the Oklahoma bombing, radio broadcaster Bob Grant from WABC in New York, was declaring that Islam is a "violent" religion, that Muslims were behind the detonation and expressing his desire to shoot a caller who warned of rushing to judgment (Cohen and Solomon, 1995, p.5). The peaceful intentions of the American Muslim and Arab American communities are made suspect. The public began to view the Muslim or Arab neighbor with increased suspicion and hostility. The New York Times speculated in the first day of reporting on why terrorists would have struck in Oklahoma City: "Some Middle Eastern groups have held meetings there, and the city is home to at least three mosques" (Cohen and Solomon, 1995, p.5). According to them, the presence of houses of worship was in itself grounds for suspicion.

Many news reports excused their behavior with the rush of the moment and trying to break the story. These mainstream "quality" news outlets exhibited the paranoia that one might hear from right wing groups, fear of foreigners and a belief in dark conspiracies beyond our nation's control. The truth of the matter is that the years of portraying Arabs as terrorists in countless films and television programs and even referring to every crime committed by

an Arab or Muslim, regardless if acted alone, as terrorism has made it fact in the public's perception.

The media is probably the most influential source in the image-making of the contemporary Arab and Muslim. In order to provide a fair and objective view of events happening around the world and the United States, a new understanding of who and what is an Arab and Muslim must be achieved. The slate must be swiped cleaned of prior misrepresentations and interpretations of this ethnic group. As with any other ethnic group, the actions of a few cannot represent the entire group.

Promoting Cultural Awareness

Historically, Arabs have been able to integrate, rather than reject or destroy, other cultures. In fact, the Arab civilization has largely contributed to many democratic experiments throughout history. Other societies have always looked up to the Arab pluralism and the meaningful interaction among various diverse groups that resulted in social harmony. The foundations of the American democracy and government are deeply rooted in the universal principles of civic functioning advocated by Arab civilizations.

As far as Arab Americans are concerned, their tendency to enrich their lives through effective interaction with others appeared

to carry over as they easily entered the mainstream of American culture, placing assimilation above ethnic identification (Banks, 1997). However, in contrast to the Arab Christians, assimilation was much more difficult for the Arab Muslims because of their strong adherence to Islamic faith and law (Banks, 1997).

The Arab community is one of the most heterogeneous in the United States. Yet, it is also one of the most misunderstood. It is the negative images and stereotypes of Arabs that are the most prevalent (Al-Ani, 1999). The popular images of Arabs as rich sheiks, religious zealots, or terrorists are gross stereotypes (Nieto, 2000; Suleiman, 1997). Since many Arabs are Muslims, their dress and traditions are quite misunderstood. Many Muslim girls wear head covering because of the emphasis on modesty. Their diet is restricted; it is against Islamic law to eat pork or drink alcohol. Teachers need to be aware of the month of Ramadan in which many Muslim students participate in fasting. Also, the Islamic holidays follow the lunar calendar and thus vary from year to year.

Family life is a very important part of Arabs. Arab Americans are proud of their cultural background. They value the family and take pride in the members of their extended families, communities, and countries. They share certain recognized cultural traits such as generosity, hospitality, courage, and respect for the elderly (Al-

Khatab, 1998). Most importantly, Arab Americans invest in their children through education which is seen as a social asset, cognitive need, religious duty, and cultural nourishment necessary for both the survival of both individuals and groups.

These social and cultural fact must be the substance for understanding the sociocultural context of educating Arab American students. Teachers and curriculum designers should integrate non-biased materials that can enrich the lives of mainstream students while learning about other ethnic and cultural groups.

At the same time, teachers must engage in the unteaching of myths, stereotypes, and false images incubated in the minds of Arab American students' peers given the socio-ecological conditions.

Promoting Physical and Intellectual Affirmation

Arab American students are among the new sizable ethnic groups comprising the student population in the United States. Although they have been highly visible through negative image making and stereotypes (Suleiman, 1997), Arab American students have generally been an invisible minority in many ways (Nieto, 2000).

The reasons for their invisibility are varied. First, their immigration to the United States has been uneventful. Their transition has been relatively smooth. Most importantly, Arab

students have not suffered any significant failures in schools as some other ethnic groups. Finally, they are not always a racially visible minority (Nieto, 2000). Furthermore, Arab American students have been successful in schools. According to 1980 U.S. Census, Arab Americans have a higher educational achievement level and significantly higher number of high school and college graduates than the U.S. population as a whole and than most ethnic groups (Banks, 1997). Also, many of the second-wave of immigrants have come already educated and many come to pursue higher education (Adeeb, 1995). Moreover, their adherence to their cultural values has been a powerful motivational force for educational success. For example, the religious and social stratification stresses seeking knowledge as the duty of every individual; it is a social and religious asset to become educated.

As the number of Arab American students in public schools has largely increased, so has attempts to integrate strategies and materials (Schwartz, 1999) to affirm their physical and intellectual being in the school culture. Although there is a lot written about various ethnic groups, there is little information about Arab Americans, their culture, school experiences, or learning styles (Nieto, 2000). Many schools have not yet acknowledged Arab culture and history or even tried to dispel Arab stereotyping

(Schwartz, 1999). In fact, the existence of Arab American students has been benignly neglected. There is a need to transform the curriculum and instruction in public schools to infuse culturally pedagogical treatments conducive to the needs of all students including Arab Americans.

Improving Educational Opportunities

Placed in mainstream classrooms, Arab American students are often confronted by preconceived prejudices and biases. Influenced by a prejudicial, biased curriculum and literature, negative cultural attitudes, uninstructed film industry, and electronic literature, and printed and television media, American perception of Arab American students and their families range from the overly romanticized to the harmfully negative (Adeeb, 1995; Santos and Suleiman, 1991). Schools can make sure that Arabs are accurately and fairly represented in the curriculum and school activities. Barlow (as cited in Schwartz, 1999) has documented that many of the texts covering Middle East subjects are inaccurate. Suleiman (1998) provides an example of how the hidden curriculum results in unlearning when given contributions are neglected. He argues that all students learn about Middle Ages deals with the mid-age crisis of Europe while glowing Middle Eastern civilizations at that time are not mentioned or integrated. This is a typical case of ethnocentric

mainstream curriculum that deprives all students from developing a global perspective in understanding history and social dynamics.

While schools can largely contribute to the transformation of ethnocentric curriculum, they can also take action against prejudice, discrimination and incidences of racism. They can also provide professional training for their staff and teachers, and provide them with accurate textbooks. Schools can avoid discriminating against diverse groups by raising conscious awareness about various social patterns and traditions.

As far as Arab American students are concerned, knowledge of their culture and history should help educators to construct a more realistic picture of their students. For example, being aware of food taboos, dress codes, and restrictions on male and female interaction, multicultural teachers can direct and re-direct their energies to reach out to their students in a meaningful way.

Teachers can enhance pride in Arab America students by learning about the many contributions of Arabs in all fields such as algebra, science, linguistics, astrology, art and architecture. Teachers can also increase Arabic speaking students' self-image through affirming their language; Arabic-speaking students are very proud of their language heritage given that Arabic, once a lingua franca, is recognized as one of the six official languages at the United Nations

(Bennett, 1999), let alone the over billion people who know Arabic across the globe.

Teachers should also be sensitive to their students' feelings and behavior. Since harassment of Arab American students increases when negative news reports about political events that involve Arabs, or even seem to involve them, teachers need to be prepared to respond. The social action approach (Banks, 1995) can be a viable tool to engage all students to create solutions for social problems through mutual respect and proactive communication and discourse. It is very important for teachers to recognize the diversity within the Arab culture and the differences and similarities between previous and new immigrant groups (Adeeb, 1995) as they seek to integrate equitable pedagogy and provide empowering educational opportunities for all students.

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